

## Interludes by veausy

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**Summary:**

Hopper's heavy thudding footsteps pushed her up the steps of the porch until her hand extended to the doorknob - and then the door swung open, slamming hard against the wall behind it, as Mike stepped out onto the threshold and stared at her, face pale and lips parted.

They stood like that, dimly lit by the hallway lamp, until Hopper cleared his throat.

"Mike," she breathed.

## Interludes

It would have been much easier to go straight from the lab to the cabin - and she half expected Hopper to insist on it - but when El was awoken from a fitful doze in the truck by the sound of the engine shutting off, she couldn't see the familiar woods. She didn't move, forehead stuck to the window and body contorted with exhaustion.

"Kid," he grunted, hand slapping lightly onto her knee. "C'mon, it'll be warmer inside."

Gathering up the last of her energy, she slumped out of the car, eyes droopy but seeking out the brightly lit windows and the door, closer with each step. The house and its surroundings were deathly quiet; she felt like there was nobody around for miles.

Hopper's heavy thudding footfalls pushed her up the steps of the porch until her hand extended to the doorknob - and then the door swung open, slamming hard against the wall behind it, as Mike stepped out onto the threshold and stared at her, face pale and lips parted.

They stood like that, dimly lit by the hallway lamp, until Hopper cleared his throat.

"Mike," she breathed.

He launched himself at her, nearly toppling them both to the ground, just barely holding onto one of the porch columns. Eleven breathed him in, the familiar scent of laundry detergent and the couches in the basement and the wood of the D & D table and safety.

As he pushed them along into the living room, Hopper called to Joyce and suggested that the whole group stay out the night - and possibly the next few days - at his comparatively remote cabin. If there were still danger at large, at least they could face it from a more private and protected place, after they'd had a chance to recuperate.

Eleven continued to doze on the couch to the sound of soft murmurs,

wrapped in a blanket that Joyce procured and Mike bundled her in, eyelids flickering half-open as she struggled with her own fatigue. At one point, a soft weight landed on her shoulder and she realized Mike's head was pressed against hers, his lips parted in sleep and his hand loosely wrapped around her ankle. She studied him, feeling lighter than she had in over a year, every eyelash that was pressed against his cheeks a new lifeline, a new reason to be in the world. She could save him, and he could save her. They saved each other.

Somewhere near the wall, Nancy cleared her throat, "Besides, this place might be under watch."

After a small pause, Joyce turned to her. "What?"

"We don't know for sure," Nancy hedged, glancing at Jonathan quickly. "But all our houses might be monitored. It's probably a good idea to leave."

Hopper grunted in the affirmative, waving a finger around at all the drawings taped up around them. "This is ... it's going to be a mess."

Steve pulled the ice pack resting on his face down and blinked one eye eerily. "Okay, but is there space for all of us with these little shitheads?"

There was a loud slap in the kitchen and Dustin appeared in the doorway, "So he can call us shitheads, but I can't say demodogs?"

All around her, everyone scrambled to grab some overnight belongings, and Eleven let her eyelids flutter all the way closed, warm in her cocoon of blankets with her favorite person sleeping next to her. Day 353 was done; it was Day 1.

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The first thing she heard in the morning were whispers, far enough away that she was surprised they'd awoken her, but close enough that she couldn't fall back asleep. El opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling of the cabin's main room, feeling a ray of sunlight slowly tracking over her cheek from the window.

Max and Lucas were sitting at the kitchen table, groggy and wrinkly

with sleep, whispering with their heads close to each other. Nobody else was awake.

El looked around, finding Mike's head close to hers, turned away, and Will on her other side, both still breathing deeply. As she shifted in her sleeping bag, she sensed a weight on her stomach and found Nancy's arm over her waist, contorted somehow between everyone else to fit into the tiny cabin. El stood slowly, stepping over bodies as she made herself a glass of water. Once she'd downed it, she found both Max and Lucas watching her.

She lifted her glass. "Would you like some?"

Lucas nodded, but Max looked away. It wasn't until Eleven had seated herself at the table that Max met her eyes. She gave a quick smile. "How'd you sleep?"

"Okay, thank you," El replied, glancing between her and Lucas.

Max smiled again, but only with her mouth, and looked back out of the window. The sun was rising quickly through the trees, casting weird shadows on the table and stretching light over the floor and a dozen sleeping bags. El gulped down some more water.

Lucas rubbed his eyes. "You feeling back to 100%?"

El blinked. "100%?"

Lucas glanced at Max and whispered quickly, "Do you have your full energy back? Hop said you were barely alive last night."

"I think I 'have my full energy back,'" El nodded. "Sleep was good."

Max huffed, smirking at Lucas, "Well, cuddling Mike would probably make for some good sleep."

El stared at her. "You were cuddling Mike?"

Lucas laughed silently and shook his head, while Max looked at her with an offended expression, and El was stuck glancing between them to try to understand. Off to the side, someone shifted, and El looked down to see Mike turn on his side toward where she'd been lying

previously and settle down. She wanted to get back in her sleeping bag.

"Not in any universe," Max whispered, a bit loud and harsh in the quiet morning air. "You were cuddling with him from the moment you both passed out at the Byers' until about an hour ago." Her head cocked to the side, motioning to Mike, who was moving around again restlessly. El watched him for a moment, warmth spreading through her chest slowly.

"Why are you already awake?" she finally asked, looking at Lucas steadfastly.

He shook his head, "Nightmares. And I woke up Max." He stood, stretching, and made to walk to the bathroom.

"It's really okay," Max whispered after him, looking so genuinely sympathetic that El felt like she was on the cusp of some sort of understanding, but she couldn't quite reach it. "I don't sleep very well, either." Now that they sat alone at the table, El looked at Max directly, and found the girl looking right back. Her red hair was glowing in the sunlight, a unique thing that El's eyes hadn't ever seen before. Max was pretty. "Eleven, I just want to make sure I haven't done anything wrong. The way we first met kind of made it seem like you didn't like me very much, but I really hope we can be friends."

El's eyes slid of their own accord back to Mike's sleeping bag, finding him rolled up on his side with his face stuck in her pillow. Max followed her gaze. "He really, really likes you." El's eyes snapped back to her. "I think if you become my friend, he might finally let me hang out with you guys." After a pause, she added, "I think he hates me."

Feeling deeply gratified, but feeling very badly about it, El managed a small smile. "Friends."

Max watched her, awed, and nodded slowly. "Friends?"

El looked at Mike again. "Friends."

—

A quiet knock roused Eleven out of her doze, and she pulled up the

edge of the blanket hanging over her, one eye adjusting to the light of the basement as it blinked blarily.

Max stood at the bottom of the stairs, her knuckles poised over the railing. As her gaze met Eleven's eye, she grinned, finger rising to point at the fort. "Do you actually sleep in there?" When Eleven didn't immediately respond, she walked quickly closer, head ducking to get a look into the fort. "Isn't it way too small?"

El's brow crinkled, and she shifted further back to hide the body beside her, but Max jerked the edge of the blanket up gleefully. "Wheeler!"

Mike snuffled himself awake in response, glaring at Max confusedly. "What are you doing here?"

Max dropped to the ground beside her, legs crossed, and sighed. "Lucas sent me to get his Chem book. He's stuck helping Erica with some arts and crafts project." As the other two watched, she began to remove her glistening scarf and hat, revealing bright red cheeks and spraying small droplets of water on El's arm. El stared at them.

"I haven't seen it," Mike grunted, arms crossing as he sat up and put some distance between himself and El.

"Well, yeah," Max rolled her eyes, "that's why I'm here." She turned to the side, attention roving over the flat surfaces of the couch and the D & D table, before turning back. "Do you guys seriously sleep in here?"

El rolled back onto the ground, nestling her head into the pillow. It was Thursday afternoon and all of Hawkins had been snowed in since Tuesday; after strenuous begging and some door-slamming, she had convinced Hopper to let her spend the quiet days with Mike, especially since Hopper still had to report for work and she would otherwise be alone at the cabin. She looked at the top of the fort, the pattern of the inside of the coverlet, marked almost messily with handdrawn flowers.

Mike shuffled around, shifting the blanket on his legs and kicking it out to the side. "It's quiet down here, and Holly hates coming in the

basement.” Finally he looked up, a scowl on his face, “Shouldn’t you be looking for the book?”

Max grinned again. “They’re sweeping the street right now, so I have a lot of time, Paladin.”

Mike huffed and threw his hands up, finally crawling over El’s body and standing up. “You want anything to eat?” he asked, looking at her. She shook her head.

Max blinked up at him with a bright smile. “One of those cookies I saw on the counter would be nice.”

Mike nodded facetiously and stomped away, the stairs near the landing creaking under his weight. When he was gone, Max turned to El. “Are you guys, like - ?”

El rose onto an elbow and watched her. Max’s eyebrows wiggled. “Are you?”

“What?” El murmured, a tension running up her spine. More and more since the closing of the gate, she was exposed to phrases and questions she couldn’t answer, or even comprehend. Sometimes Hopper would glare at Mike, or Joyce would raise her eyebrows at Jonathan, or Lucas would elbow Dustin, and El saw all of it but couldn’t put it together. It made her feel stupid, like there was a chunk of communication she could never decode.

Max studied her. “Have you *done* it?”

“What?” El repeated, more defensively. The sentence was simple, she knew what it meant, but what was it referencing? Was El expected to know? Watching television at the cabin had improved her English and her understanding of a lot of concepts almost exponentially - she still remembered one episode of *I Love Lucy* she saw in the spring one night when Hopper was late. *How much do you want to bet?* asked Lucy. *Ten dollars*, replied Fred. Bet, bet, bet, bet, she’d said it over and over until Hop came home and gave her a dictionary. But what was *it*?

Max glanced up at the stairs, and when she turned back to El, her

expression was more careful. She lifted her hat, which had left a big splotch of wet while it was lying on her pants, before throwing it on the carpet. "Never mind. Mike probably wouldn't want me to be asking you. 'No secrets' and all that."

El frowned, repeating faintly, "No secrets." She watched as Max clambered up, stomping around the room and upturning everything. Eventually, she strayed to a corner where El couldn't see her, and it got quiet. El fiddled with the comforter and once again dropped herself onto her pillow, frustrated.

"Ah-ha!" came Max's shout a second later, and two freckled hands holding a large book appeared in El's field of vision. "Now I have to find a bag to put it in. Have you looked outside? It's wet everywhere." The hands disappeared and Max's face loomed in the slit of the blankets. "Like, it feels like I'm breathing water. Feel this." Something cold and wet slapped against El's cheek, making her cry out and scramble toward the wall, further into the fort. Max's voice turned alarmed, "Hey! Are you okay?"

With her hand pressed to her cheek, El looked up at Max, who was crowding into the fort entrance, holding the end of her scarf, still visibly wet. Before she could say anything, Mike's voice floated over. "What's going on, what did you do?" His hands pulled Max back and away, and then his face was there, close, looking at El with concern.

Feeling warm once again, El shook her head. "I - her scarf."

Max elaborated, "I was showing her how wet my scarf is. I think I caught her off guard. Sorry, El."

Mike sent a quick glare at her and rolled his eyes. "Haven't we been over this, Max?"

"Oh, what, like you're the expert? You're telling me you haven't screwed up once?"

Mike's eyebrows climbed his forehead and he shook his head.

Max leaned down to pick up her hat with a sigh. "Well, we can't all be in love with her." Ignoring how Mike flushed deep red and



ducking her head again to get a clear view of El's face, Max tilted the end of her mouth up. "Sorry again, El. I'm gonna head out." As the sound of her swishy coat drifted further away, she called loudly, "Thanks for the cookie, Wheeler! Not."

Mike looked back at El. "Are you okay?"

She was fine. It wasn't even as though she was in an environment where the sensation of the wet scarf on her skin would actually make her fear for her safety. She had never been safer than here, under a mess of blankets in a corner of Mike's basement, while he sat and looked at her. As her eyes swam over the soft look on his face, his winter-pale freckles, something large and uncontrollable expanded in her chest. She lunged forward, wrapping her arms around Mike's neck and burying her face in his skin.

"Whoa," Mike laughed, falling forward slightly. One of his hands landed on the middle of her back, and El felt it like the sun. She was safe.

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A car horn blared loudly, and El squeezed closer to Mike's back, giggles falling from her throat almost without her consent, a giddy energy making her muscles tense and her eyes squeeze shut.

"Oh, fuck off," Mike shouted, raising his arm - El couldn't make herself open her eyes to see - and then dropping it back to the bike handle. The motion shifted muscles in his back, and her arms around his torso slipped lower, so she tightened her grip, rubbing her nose into his jacket. The wind was hurdling through her hair much as she and Mike were hurdling down Seminary Street, all downhill and empty.

Somewhere to the right and a bit behind her, Will dinged his bike bell, and it tinkled through the air delicately. Far in front of them, Dustin shouted, "Can you people speed it up?" but it was tinny, lost in the whoosh of air past El's ears and the hot pound of her heart as she clung to Mike.

Something soft and small slapped against her nose and stuck to it,

making her eyes pop open in alarm. She unraveled her hand from its grip deep in Mike's blue sweater and picked a leaf off her face, staring at it. The trees lining the street were all completely bare, deep in the throes of their February slumber, and she tilted her head back to see if the leaf matched anything in the sky. It didn't.

Twirling it once between two fingers, she smiled slightly, and reached her hand into the pocket of Mike's coat, leaving it there. Maybe he'd find it one day.

Eyes now open, she stared with wonder at the sight of the scenery as it sped by. There was wet slush on the sides of the roads, slowly melting snow that signaled the end of a harsh winter, and Mike swerved expertly between chunks of ice as they sped down, down, down the never-ending street. As she took a deep breath, Will overtook them and sped past, dinging his bell once more.

Another deafening honk made her laugh again, craning her neck to look through the windshield of the car closely tailing Mike's bike. Lucas tipped his chin up, a smirk on his face, and Max rolled her window down, piling her arms on the door and resting her head on them. "How's it feel coming in last, Wheeler? Is it a familiar feeling?"

One more honk, and Max's laughter floated through the air.

"For your information," Mike called out, and El could feel the reverberations of his voice against her cheek, spreading out through his chest and seeping into hers. "I'm carrying two lives here, each much more valuable than *Dustin's*, so excuse me for keeping it at thirty-five like a sane person."

Lucas shook his head, and Max ducked back into the car, before they sped off to catch up with the other two. As El watched over Mike's shoulder, the car reached a stop sign and turned, leaving her and Mike alone as they closed in on the bottom of the slope. The street was completely silent on an early Sunday morning, and the air was crisp, and as Mike braked near the sidewalk, El took a deep breath that filled her up with something she couldn't name.

She looked down from the sky when she realized they weren't moving, and Mike lowered his feet to the ground to keep the bike

from falling. El watched the side of his face, waiting.

“Is this okay?” he asked finally, turning a bit within the circle of her arms to catch her eye. “You weren’t scared or anything?”

Pursing her lips in a smile, she shook her head. “Was fun.”

Mike nodded, more to himself than to her, and turned back to survey the street. “Do you wanna go with them to the drive-through? We could just go home.”

“Aren’t you hungry?” She’d felt his stomach grumbling a few times during the ride. He was so much taller than her now, growing so much every day, it seemed like no amount of food could properly feed him. Will had suggested the drive-through, but El knew it was Mike’s favorite place.

Mike shrugged a shoulder. “I’m sure there’s snacks and stuff in the pantry. Or I could just steal some of Lucas’s fries. Who knew he’d turn into such a smarmy asshole when he got his driver’s permit.”

El squeezed her arms around him once more, her voice quiet. “Mike.”

He looked at her, eyes clustered inward because of how close their faces were. It made her smile. “El.”

*I love you*, she wanted to say. She didn’t know what it meant. She barely knew what love by itself was, and she certainly couldn’t say she knew her own feelings enough to name them. But the way she felt now, looking at the arch of his brows and the tilt of his smile, reminded her of the swelling music in every old film she’d seen since Hopper had taken her in. The burst of emotion that made the glamorous women and the handsome men say, “I love you,” to the sound of something that pounded in her ears, like the wind. Or her heart.

“Let’s go to the drive-through. And then to the cabin,” she said instead.

“Hop’s cabin?” he asked, bewildered. “But he’d kill me.”

El found a stray snag on Mike’s sweater where her hand was buried

near his hip, and she picked at it absently. The repetitive motion was familiar to her, and she often picked at Mike's clothing when he was near her, comforted by the fabrics and the warmth of Mike's body. "Why?"

Mike's eyes darted away, the way they did when he was trying to find something to say that wasn't exactly the truth. He'd done it once when Nancy mentioned being a vegetarian and he'd had to explain what animal slaughter was. He didn't really, so she'd asked Dustin the next day. She preferred Mike's version. "I don't think Hop likes me very much."

"I like you," El said, tipping her cheek against his shoulder blade again and letting her gaze rest on the trees. "So Hop likes you."

"Fine, but then we need to have the others come, too."

"No," El frowned. "Just you."

Mike leaned to the side so he could see her better. "What, why?"

"I -" She didn't know how to say it. That she could do, say, and feel anything around Mike and know that it was okay. There weren't secret snickers that she couldn't understand, or references to movies and games she hadn't heard of. Mike was just hers, and he made her feel like what she was could not be diminished. "I -"

After a long enough pause, Mike's skin got a bit pink, and he looked at the ground. "Yeah, okay. We'll go to the cabin."

"Just you?"

Mike nodded, putting his feet back on the pedals. "Just me." As they turned the corner, he called, "You know what you're gonna order?"

El couldn't think of anything else she'd want.

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Hop appeared in the doorway, leaning against the frame with a put-upon look on his face and his hands in his belt loops. "The Wheeler kid's here to see you."

El put down her pen and glared at him. “Mike.”

“Mike,” Hopper mouthed silently, mocking, and waved at her desk. “Don’t think that it means you get out of finishing your lessons. I want Math, English, and Social Studies all on the coffee table by nine.”

El closed the books she’d been studying with and piled them neatly on the end of her desk. Joyce had her excelling in a few areas of study, with the hope that she could be integrated into the high school the following fall, at least for half of the curriculum. Science did not come easily to her - to Mike’s eternal chagrin - and learning another language was plainly out of consideration for now, so she didn’t expect she’d be a real student at least for another year. But the desire to be around Mike, now that Hopper had formally adopted her and deemed it safe for her to start venturing out for short periods of time, and spend time around the rest of the party, got her to push herself with multiple lessons every night.

As she glanced out her window at the slowly setting sun, Mike cleared his throat at the door. “Hey, El.”

“Mike,” she breathed, standing and crossing the steps between them to plaster herself against him. They stood like that for a moment, breathing quietly, until Mike started fidgeting, always aware of some level of discomfort that she never could sense. She studied his face, the freckles that were now starting to show up again as he spent more time in the sun, and then she stepped away.

He cleared his throat again, stepping into her room sheepishly, and said, “Well, uh, good news! It’s not gonna be two weeks next time! Hop says you’re going to take P.E. next year, so he wants us to start doing some physical activities in the back yard once May starts. It’s pretty much warm enough. So next time I see you will be Tuesday.”

El followed him as he walked across the floor, his hand running along the back of her chair, and then the dresser. He was getting so tall she could barely see the top of his head anymore, not even if she got on the tips of her toes.

“You’ll be teaching me?”

Mike turned around, hands wringing at his sides. "Well, it'll be all six of us. Hop thinks it's a good idea for all of us to get some sort of physical training. I mean, I told him it's stupid for you, since you can just defend yourself with your powers, but -"

"Mike," El stopped him. He was rambling, the way he did sometimes when he didn't want to do or say something, but she didn't understand why anybody would put off something that was hurting them. "What is it?"

He quirked his mouth strangely, like he was trying to smile but failing. "I just wanted to ask you about something."

"What is it?" she repeated. With a tip of her head, she shut the door quietly.

A second later, Hop snapped, "Hey," from the living room. "Door open!"

El rolled her eyes. "Just a minute!" She still didn't understand most of Hop's rules, but Mike had taught her about privacy, and this felt like it related to privacy.

"Okay, okay, um," Mike looked at her lamp, at her door, at her feet. El grabbed his hands. "Um, so - you know how you went with me to the Snow Ball? And we danced, and we kissed?"

El blinked. "Yes."

"Okay, well, I mean, we never really talked about, like, what it meant, you know? And I just realized that it might be unfair to you, and I want to be as honest as possible."

"Okay." A thought struck her, a flickering memory from the television. "Do you want to sit?" People said that, when something serious happened.

Mike plopped himself on her bed, and she clung to hands, thereby dragged to the bed with him. They listened to the mattress creak and Mike paled, eyes glued to the door in fear. El followed his gaze, but there was nothing there. After a moment, he released a deep sigh of relief and went on, "So, uh, kissing and dancing and all that, it's not a

friends thing.”

“Okay.”

“Like, I wouldn’t kiss Dustin, you know? Or dance with Max.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah, so people who dance and kiss and stuff are ... more than friends, usually. Have you noticed that?”

“Like Nancy and Jonathan. And Lucas and Max.”

“Yeah, and they don’t do that with anybody else. It’s a one-person thing. I mean, unless you decide you want a different person. And I sort of - I know I kissed you first, back during that first week in 1983, and I’ve kind of been leading us in all this, but I never -” he swallowed. El’s eyes ran over his face, unable to capture or identify the sickly emotion she saw there now. “I never really asked you what you want, or if you - if you even want anything.”

She processed his words, and she felt like she understood the general idea. “Mike.” When he kept his eyes on the ground, she grasped his wrist, and then his elbow. “Mike.” He raised his eyes to her neck, his cheeks blotchy. “I don’t want to kiss anyone else.”

“Sure,” he nodded, “but do you want to kiss *me*?”

El blinked. “Yes.” She couldn’t imagine it if Mike suddenly stopped letting her kiss him. She didn’t know why they did it, exactly, she didn’t understand what the purpose was, but she knew that it was a privilege and that people liked to do it. If Mike wouldn’t let her kiss him anymore, she might cry. “Mike, yes.”

He met her eyes finally, a wobbly smile on his lips, and she stared at those lips now, having just found them to be so important to her happiness. Before she could feel herself heat up with embarrassment, she tipped forward, mouth fitting over Mike’s. His lips had been parted, so it turned into a totally new kiss for the two of them, one of her lips trapped between both of his, and it felt like a hug, like being wrapped up in his arms in a different way.

She really liked it.

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A spray of lukewarm water hit her back and El swiveled, staring at Will with betrayal. He had a surprised smile on his face, like even he couldn't believe he'd done it, and a water bottle in his hands, which he jerked again to send another gush of water into her hair.

El's breath was coming in sudden gasps, still uneven from the three miles Hopper had made them all run, and the sun was so hot in the sky, it felt like she was being pressed into the ground. With a grunt, she dropped to her knees in the grass, catching herself with her hands, and then lay flat with her eyes squinting up into the sky, every sensation coalescing into an overwhelming need to sleep.

Max jogged over, dropping down next to her, long red ponytail swinging in the air and smacking Will in the face, who only said, "Hey!" in complaint before following suit and lying in the grass.

"It's hot," panted Max.

"So hot," agreed Will.

"I can't believe it's already August and I still can't even run three miles," Lucas groaned as he crawled to them from a few feet away after collapsing minutes prior.

"I can't believe it's already August, we've been doing this for four months, and now we'll have to do it for another four in P.E.," Dustin snapped from the tree line. When El lifted her head to look at him, he was still squeezing sweat from his shirt onto a discarded log. Mike stood next to him, watching with disgusted interest. El dropped her head back, grinning.

Max rolled onto her side and settled her head on her hand, gazing down at El with a furrowed brow, golden eyelashes glimmering in the sun and making her look ethereal. Her pale white skin was dotted with freckles in the same way Mike's was starting to be, while Eleven's just browned gradually. "El, are you going to have them call you Eleven at school?"



"I don't know," she answered, eyes drifting back to the pale blue sky. There was not a single cloud to be found. "My real name is Jane."

Dustin spoke first, "Wait, what?"

El looked up. Mike was staring at her, and she wondered if this counted as a secret. She hadn't meant to keep it, she had just never remembered to bring it up. She'd never been called Jane by anyone in her life, not in a meaningful way. "Hop got me a birth certificate."

Will asked, "Did you choose the name yourself?"

"No, it was my real name. Before the Bad Men."

There was a moment of quiet. Lucas, still lying on his back with his eyes closed, said, "Do you *want* us to call you Jane?"

El shrugged. "I don't know."

Mike had yet to speak, still standing close to the trees with an indiscernible look on his face, his posture muted. Dustin elbowed him and they walked closer to the group, studying the grass under their feet. Max clapped her hands together, sitting up, "Well, you don't have to know yet. You have another month before school starts, anyway. They're both killer names."

Mike scratched at the back of his head and spoke, finally, "Maybe we can try calling you Jane for a few days? And you can let us know what works better."

El nodded, eyes caught on him and a deep sense of sadness building inside her. Her chest felt tight. She'd hurt Mike.

After a few more minutes of small talk, Max convinced everyone to walk to the creek on the opposite side of the property, since the water was mostly shaded and always cool. Mike stayed near El, who remained on the ground as everyone began to walk, and she pleaded, "Are you mad?"

He blinked in surprise. "Mad about what?"

"I didn't tell you about Jane."

He extended a hand to her, and she stared at it. It was empty. Mike grinned and wiggled his fingers, "Give me your hand, El." They grasped one another and then Mike lifted her up, a wholly new sensation that felt exhilarating, and she made a mental note to ask him to do it again. As they began to follow the others, he said, gently, "Of course I'm not mad, El. You're allowed to tell us or not tell us whatever you want. Your life is yours to share, and you should never feel like you owe people information about yourself."

"But," El swallowed, "friends don't keep secrets."

Mike looked at her, serious. "I don't think this counts as a secret. It's your name, and it's your past. It's painful for you. Not everyone likes to share their pain, and I would never ask you to."

El nodded. They walked quietly for a few minutes, following the sounds of their friends through the sparse woods and into a clearing. Once they were back out in the sun, she ventured, "I don't want you to call me Jane."

Mike nodded quickly. "Okay, I'll let the others know -"

"No," El stopped him with a hand on his arm, and they paused a few paces away from where Max was stripping out of her shirt and Dustin was hooting and hollering over it. "Just you. You made me El. El is yours." Mike stared back at her wordlessly for a long enough time that El wondered if she'd said something wrong. Then, without warning, he leaned down and kissed her, pulling away and pecking her another two times. His face was red when she opened her eyes.

"Okay," he murmured, lips so close to hers that it tickled her mouth.

"Hey, Jane!" Max yelled from the riverbank, donning only her shorts and a tight shirt that ended at her ribs. "Get in here!" Her legs were partially immersed, water lapping at her knees weakly, and Lucas was next to her flicking water at her with his feet. El extracted her hands slowly from Mike's hair and stepped away, suddenly afraid that everything she was feeling and thinking was written on her face. As she approached Max, the other girl developed an odd glint in her eyes, glancing at Mike behind her. "Hey, why don't you take your shirt off like I did? You don't want to wear it wet."

El shrugged, pulling at the hem, when Mike and Dustin shrieked, "No! El! Privacy!" Confused, she dropped the hem again.

Max made a face. "*Privacy*'?"

Dustin glanced at Lucas, who was grinning at Mike, and then at Mike, who shook his head jerkily, and rolled his eyes. "We take our clothes off in the *privacy* of our own rooms."

Max pointed at herself. "Do you see me standing here in my bra?" No one spoke. "Take your shirt off, El."

El complied. She didn't want it to get wet. Folding it carefully, she put it next to her feet. When she looked up, nobody but Max was making eye contact with her, and Mike was leaning down, single-mindedly retying his shoelaces. Max beckoned her closer, a grin on her face, "You know how to swim, right?"

#### **Author's Note:**

Unapologetic, reckless fluff. There was no plan here, because I've been in a writing slump, but soft and gentle Mileven doesn't need plot. Will update periodically with additional vignettes, all consequent to the Stranger Things 2 finale and piled extra high with fluff.